

THE RESURRECTION AND IMMORTALITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

EASTER is the spring festival and has been celebrated among all nations since the dawn of civilization. The name Easter is of pagan origin and refers to the goddess Ostara, the Teutonic goddess of the East, who is credited with the rejuvenescence of nature. Among the ancient Orientals the Babylonians, Syrians, Phœnicians, and others, the Easter festival was a rejoicing at the resurrection of Tammuz, Adonis or Baal, the god of vegetation, whose death had been lamented in a kind of pagan Good Friday celebration. The Christian Easter was naturally attached to the Hebrew passover which most probably was also originally a spring festival, but under the influence of the Deuteronomist priests was later changed into a memorial of the Exodus from Egypt.

In many places the pagan celebration continued in its external forms and simply replaced the pagan Adonis by the Christian Jesus, the natural background and the rejoicing at the resuscitated life remaining the same in either case,—it was the god that died and was again called back to new life.

For an appreciation of the Christian doctrine of resurrection we must consider the character and life interests of the primitive Christians. Their numbers were recruited from the poorer classes and were mostly uneducated. Their interest in an after-life consisted mainly in the assurance that they would be resurrected in their bodily identity, in consequence of which their Easter message naturally took the turn that Jesus had risen bodily from the grave, and this belief has been incorporated more and more into the Gospel stories. It is noteworthy that nothing is stated with more contradiction and obscurity than the resurrection of Jesus. The original report of the oldest and most authentic Gospel (which is Mark) ends with the statement that the grave was empty. We may be assured that the disciples believed in the resurrection and that they

had visions of the risen Christ, but here as in many other respects the Fourth Gospel flatly contradicts the account of Matthew and Mark. According to St. John and Luke, Christ appears to his disciples in Jerusalem; according to Matthew, in Galilee, and the conclusion of Mark is lost. It has been replaced by a few verses (Mark xvi. 9-20) which contain the parting command of Jesus.

Higher critics have discovered a gradual increase of the corporeal and sensuous element intended to prove the bodily identity of the risen Christ with the crucified Saviour. While the original report only knows of the empty grave, later on the risen Christ denies that he is a spirit. He says (Luke xxiv. 38-39):

"Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have."

The vision of St. Paul, too, is reported first as having been a mere vision which affected only the sense of sight. In another report, however, we read that Christ spoke to Paul, and so it is assumed that the sense of hearing was also affected. We have here apparently a modification of the story to answer the questions of doubters that Paul's experience was a mere hallucination, and we find the last stage carried to such a materialistic conception of the resurrection that Jesus to convince the unbelievers of his bodily existence, requests some meat, "And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat it before them."

The attitude of critical readers toward these accounts has been different. Some who accept them as inspired, believe implicitly in a bodily resurrection; others make out with some show of plausibility that Christ did not die while on the cross, and was revived. They suggest that he might have lived in seclusion for some time and then died a peaceful death among his intimate friends. Omitting the solution after the fashion of the Gordian knot which would relegate all the reports of the Gospels into the realm of fable, we will mention a third interpretation of the Gospel texts which assumes that the burial of Christ by Joseph of Arimathea was historical and in fact there is nothing incredible in the event itself. Mark states this incident as follows (xv, 42-47):

"And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathæa, an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly to Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus. And Pilate marvelled if he were already dead: and calling unto him

the centurion, he asked him whether he had been any while dead. And when he knew it of the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid."

The same account has been incorporated almost literally in Matthew and John, and in the latter there is an additional mention of Nicodemus. Joseph of Arimathea is praised in the account as a "good man and a just," and it is further said that he was secretly a disciple of Jesus which suggests that he was not openly identified with the Nazarenes. He is never mentioned before nor after, and we may fairly well assume that this is the only relation that he had with the disciples, for otherwise considering his wealth and the prominence of his position he would certainly have played an important part in the congregation at Jerusalem.

Taking the standpoint of impartial critique without accepting miracles and without denying that the Gospel stories go back to original accounts and still reflect events that actually took place, we would naturally ask, what interest can a well-to-do man of official standing among the Jews have taken in the body of a crucified man with whom most likely he had very little in common? and the answer that suggests itself (as a German scholar, Paul Schwartzkopff has proposed) is not far to seek. According to the common belief of the age, bodies of executed men were endowed with magic power. We know that the nails used for crucifixion, hang-ropes, and other articles that had done service in an execution were deemed to possess miraculous powers, and it stands to reason that the body of a man who in the opinion of his followers was reputed to have performed miracles himself, should be credited more than others with supernatural qualities. It would be quite in keeping with the notions of the time that Joseph of Arimathea wanted the body of the crucified Jesus for the purpose of having his own tomb sanctified by the great thaumaturge, and he considered it a protection if his own body might rest by the side of the Nazarene's. Accordingly it was to his interest to secure possession of the body for himself alone and remove it also from any interference from the followers of Jesus. If this assumption be true, the next step that Joseph would take could only be the removal of the body to a place within his own control and unknown to others especially the followers of Jesus.

The story of the guards bears all the symptoms of a late inser-

tion invented to refute the idea that the body might have been removed. It is scarcely accepted as genuine or even ancient by any one of the critics and stands on the same level with the account of the resurrection itself which is reported most dramatically by Matthew in chapter xxviii, as having taken place in the presence of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. We read (xxviii. 2-7):

"And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said to the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you."

The women saw the angel and heard his words, but nothing is said that they themselves saw Christ rise. The doctrine of the bodily resurrection has been held with great tenacity by all Christians not excluding Protestants, but it has of late been more and more declared to be unessential, and it is doubtful whether any leading Protestant theologian would commit himself to regard it as an essential article of faith. With the change of our views concerning immortality which from a belief in the revival of the body has more and more come to be a belief in the immortality of the soul, we have also grown more accustomed to the account of Christ's resurrection as a legend in which the current notion of life after death among the early Christians found its typical embodiment. The celebration of Easter, however, remains and will remain so long as the return of spring indicates the revival of nature and the return of new life, new verdure, new joy, new blossoms and the promise of a rich harvest in the summer.